COMMUNION MEDITATION
JOHN 17:20-23
OCTOBER 7, 1973

During the Battle of Britain in 1940, one of Germany's priority targets was the city of Coventry, a major English industrial center. The blitz there was very effective and one of the casualties of the bombing was Coventry Cathedral, seat of the Anglican Diocese, a marvelous historic building erected in the middle ages. The cathedral took a direct incindiery bomb hit and was totally devastated with the exception of the ~~tweer~~ tower and part of the exterior walls.

After the war, as Coventry - along with every other major English city - was clearing the rubble and beginning to rebuild, a significant decision was made in regard to the cathedral. Instead of clearing the bombed out ruins they were left to stand and a new modern and magnificent cathedral was erected beside the remains of the old. The idea was that people ought to be reminded visually of the destruction and inhumanity of war: but also that out of the ashes and blood of human conflict, hope and ~~[illegible]~~n and resurrection can happen. The theme of the new Cathedral is reconciliation: out of its own tragic experience the parish lives with a special sensitivity to human conflict and as part of its mission sends out "reconciliation teams" to any place in the world where conflict is causing suffering: Northern Ireland, the Middle East, for instance.

But the most impressive thing about the Cathedral complex is the ruins of the old building. No roof - just 4 walls - Where the high altar once stood, a plain rectangular altar has been constructed out of pieces of old masonry. ~~On the altar is a small cross made from mideval roofing nails~~. On the wall behind is a ~~larger~~ large cross made of two charred pieces of timber. Across the front of the altar two words are inscribed: "Father Forgive."

I had heard the story of Coventry: I had seen pictures. But standing in front of that altar and cross-seeing those two plain words inscribed I was deeply moved. I had a sense of the healing power of the Gospel - the reality of the resurrection - but more than anything else, a feeling of urgency about brotherhood, reconciliation - oneness - unity: that rare phenomenon men have tried so hard to elliminate, but which keeps showing up in human history usually in times of ~~crisis~~ tragedy war. It is, as you know, what we are about when we observe something called World Communion: more than the simultaneous eating of bread and drinking of wine by several hundred million people on sevencontinents: the mechanics are academic really. What's in the air today is the unity of mankind - and the urgent need for reconciliation among men.

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theologically - concerned w/ individual salvation, not with reconciliation among men:
socially - we are provincial: even though Gospel is set in universal terms we aren't willing to consider implications beyond our lives.

Now there are a lot of things ~~about our situation~~ that mitigate against the unity of mankind ever getting on the agenda of a typical American Church. We have been nurtured on the milk of self-sufficiency. Even though we can't seem to produce enough fuel to last through the winter, there remains deep in our hearts a trust that this nation is self-sufficient. It can stand alone: we need no one.

~~Beyond that~~ In addition, the conflicts that have torn the rest of the world apart in our generation have left us - here - in this place - relatively unscathed. One of the advantages of ~~life~~ living in this community is a splendid isolation from the life and death problems of humanity in 1973. Not only have we ~~ever~~ never had bombs dropping on our homes, schools, amd churches, we have been spared the urban crisis; the racial explosion, even the campus revolt. I'm not com-plaining: it's ~~just~~ that Christians here - and churches here feel that there is nothing more urgent to do in the world in the name of Jesus Christ than conduct revival meetings and rail against a topless bar.

That's not just silly; it's tragic. Because the first item on God's agenda is the unity of mankind: the bringing together of the whole human family. And we - we who would call ourselves Christians - are the ones he has assigned to pull it off.

The B iblical concern for unity is there from the beginning, ~~although most churches chose to ignore it~~. The very basis of the Old Testament - and the faith of Israel - is that there is one God who is the creator and father of all men. Historically, a major corner in civilization was turned when the idea that every nation had its own God died, and monothism - one God ~~for~~ of all men - gained currency. That makes a family of mankind.

The tower of Babel - the disruption - is the great human tragedy against which the rest of Biblical history must be read. Jesus came calling God father: reminding his people that there is ~~one~~ one God who longs to see his children reunited. on the night of his betrayal and arrest that is the idea he held up before them. He prayed for them - that they might be one. And there he prayed for a lot of people - including us -

> "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who are to believe in me through their word, that they may all be one."

So, part of the witness of this day is ~~to experience~~ God's judgement. After twenty centuries the human family is still badly divided. And the church - still resembles that noisy crowd milling around the Tower of Babel - unable even to speak a common language. Called to be the instrument of reconciliation among men, ~~the church~~ continues to allow political

the church is not only divided by its own parochialism - it

national, racial, economic and social barriers to divide it. Part of the observance of this day is to witness to a God who weeps because his children refuse to get along with each other.

Part of it is to sense his call to sacrifice some of our precious self-sufficienty and to acknowledge that we do need other people, not only to survive, but to fulfill God's will for his creation. Trouble w/ that is that it's vague enough to mean anything - and so . . .

Modestly - tentatively - the church has tried to say ~~that~~ it, particularly as it gathers around the Table of our Lord. By reinstating the "passing of the Peace" - that time during communion when we greet each other we are affirming that we are one in Christ; that our communion is horizontal as well as vertical. that to be reconciled w/ God is to be reconciled with man.

A friend told me that a man in his church stays away on communion Sunday for that reason: in his words - ("I don't come to church on Sunday to meet people.")

people who have suffered as much as anyone in history at the hands of their fellow men

I read, a while ago, an account of how the Seminole Indians practice communion - and I'd like to share it with you. The story was told by the Reverend Ernest Ackerman, one of our National Missions Workers.

Four small congregations come together regularly for communion. Mr. Ackerman faces them - men and older boys on one side: women and children on the other. The service itself is not significantly different from ours here - except for what happens just before the benediction.

The men and women file out of the church in two parallel lines onto the lawn, singing in Seminole as they go. Throughout what follows they continue to sing, going from one hymn to another, ~~with any one of them (usually a man) starting off~~, a capella, of course.

"When all are out of the church and the two lines are facing each other about six feet apart, the lead man turns to the man next to him, shakes his hand and goes down the line shaking the hand of each. Each man in turn follows him, shaking the hands of all. When the lead man comes to the end of the line of men, he crosses over and, beginning at the end of the women's line, he shakes the hand of each woman. Every man follows, doing the same. When the head of the women's line is reached, the lead man crosses back to stand in his place; there he receives the handshake of each other person ~~men, as he comes along and takes his place. When the last man is back at the end of his line, the lead woman started the whole procedure over.~~

"The symbolism - no, the fact - is that each person who had the privilege of the Lord's grace in the sacrament by now has offered his or her own hand to every other who shared the

Communion - and has received the hand of each of the others.

"Still singing, they then bunch together in a conglomerate mass of worshippers, an elder and me in the center. Now an individual may work his or her way through the closely grouped singers to shake the hand of a particular person, then stand beside that person. The first time I saw this, I turned to Elder Tom Fife and asked what they were doing. He whispered in my ear, ("They have had bad feeling. But this is Communion.') I have seen men stand with moist eyes. I have seen women weep on each other's shoulders. There, I always say to myself, is reconciliation in its next to highest form, for there they stand, singing their hearts out, together, facing the church, the world, and life itself.

"When all has been done, the benediction is pronounced.

"On those rare occasions nowadays when I may sit in the pew of a fine church and receive the elements in the Sacrament, my mind naturally is on reconciliation. But what kind of a nut wouldpeople say I am if I were to submit to the urge to shake the hand of every other person there, with the certainty that each of them, too, had found fresh reconciliation with the Lord of all mankind?.....

"I dare suggest that some staid and rock-ribbed Presbyterians might learn a lesson from our Seminole brethren, decendants of those driven from Florida along the "Trail of Tears.'"

The human family is reunited in small, modest ways like that encounter. We need, today, to be aware of communion on a grand scale, a communion that does extend across the centuries and across divisions of nations and race. And yet one can get lost in the gradness of it all. Reconciliation - brotherhood - unity begins more modestly - between me and the person sitting next to me.

Frederick Beuckner advises: "the next time you walk down the street, take a good look at every face you pass and in your mind say, ('Christ died for thee'.) That girl. That slob. That phony. That crook. That saint. That dammned fool. Christ died for thee. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee."

So, today becomes a vision of God's plan for his creation: a promise of what could be - but more than that - a break-through, albeit temporary, of the unity and reconciliation he intends for us.

Take - eat - Christ died for me - and thee - and all men. And that makes us members of one family. AMEN.

Father - stretch our minds with a new vision of your kingdom: a kingdom in which all people belong to one family. And then help us to celebrate that vision as we commune with each other. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN